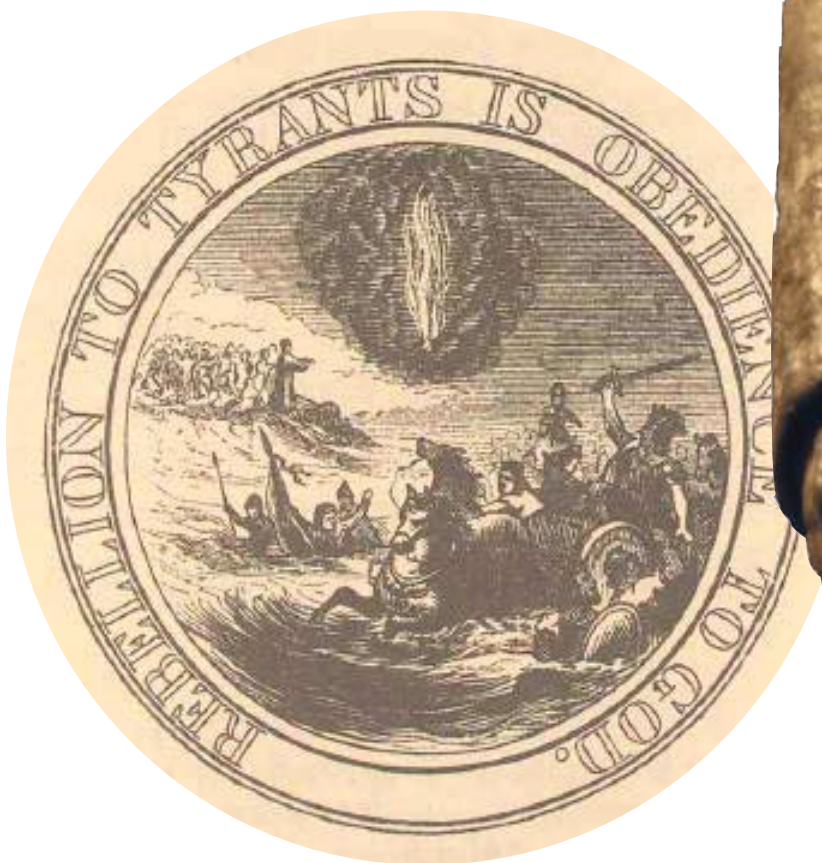


*“The Ten Commandments are  
not part of the common law of  
England . . . because they  
were never made so by  
legislative authority”*

*President Thomas Jefferson*



## Thomas Jefferson Dissents

Thomas Jefferson rejected the whole notion that the Decalogue was part of or even influential in the development of English and American law. Setting his opinion against the opinions of the most renowned English historians and jurists, the Virginia lawyer declared that the Ten Commandments were laws “made for the Jews alone” and that Christianity was no part of the common law. Jefferson was answered by, among others, Justice Joseph Story, considered the 19th century’s fore-

most writer on American law, who called Jefferson’s view on this issue “so manifestly erroneous that it could only be regarded as a willful mistake.”

Whatever views Jefferson may have held as a scholar, as a public figure he never shied away from using Biblical imagery, especially imagery taken from Exodus. In his Second Inaugural he asked for “the favor of that Being who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all

the necessities of life . . .” Jefferson’s (and Franklin’s) original design for the Great Seal of the United States consisted of Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea, following the pillar of fire, while Pharaoh’s army drowned. The motto surrounding the seal read: “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.”

Sources:

Merrill Peterson, ed. *Thomas Jefferson, Writings*, Library of America, 1984.

James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, Library of Congress, 1998.